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# Tyrants, Stewards – or Just Kings?

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'How much more valuable' says Jesus in Matthew 12.12, 'is a man than a sheep!'[1] For many Christians, the remark precludes debate. Of course there is no comparison between a human being and an animal! Many of us say without thinking that we are 'infinitely precious' to God. The sentiment is well meant; but the logical implication, whether we acknowledge it or not, is that if all other creatures on earth are of finite worth, in the end they amount to nothing – when measured against infinity, all finite values tend to zero. This unconscious arithmetic may not lead us to a conscious belief that other species are worthless, but it surely disinclines many people to stand up for them. We may allow that God likes animals – loves them, even – and cares for them; and yet, weighed in the balance against us, they do not even trouble the scales. Indeed, some Christians seem to quote Psalm 8.6 – 'You made [Man] ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet' – with a certain grim satisfaction. There is in our thinking more than a hint of human supremacism.

But the question is worth asking: How much more valuable, according to the Bible, *is* a human being than a sheep? If our supremacism in large measure derives from Hellenistic thought which has profoundly influenced the church's teaching for centuries, evangelicals have a crucial contribution to make to this debate, since we strive to build our theology solidly on the testimony of scripture. Our problem, of course, is that as we search the Bible for guidance on this issue we tend to read our own prejudices into it and imagine that we find them confirmed there with the authority of divine inspiration.[2] Thus we need to admit, and make allowance for, our bias in favour of our own kind, because it will direct us towards those statements that seem to favour us and away from those that seem to favour other species. Unfortunately, whereas our natural tendency to read our own sexist or racist assumptions into scripture can be corrected by others of the opposite sex or a different race, there are no equivalent voices to correct us when our bias in favour of our own species misleads us. And our bias is real: consider how loaded the very words 'animal', 'beast', and 'brute' are!

We lose our way, perhaps, in the opening chapters. 'For Genesis,' writes one commentator, 'the creation of man is the goal of creation.'[3] But whether 'the goal' means the object or the *terminus ad quem*, this is surely wrong: it is implicit in Genesis 1.31 that the purpose of creation is to bring pleasure to God,[4] and explicit in 2.2 that the process concludes with the Sabbath.[5] The distinction is important. If (in both senses) the end of creation is God's enjoyment of it, then the value of other creatures is determined by God's pleasure in them; on the other hand, if everything else is merely the prelude and the means to the arrival of humankind, we may be encouraged to think that everything exists for us and we are 'the measure of all things'.

I do not wish to deny the pre-eminence of humankind in God's affections or purposes, but to draw attention to some of the ways in which scripture qualifies it, which we tend to ignore. In fact, Genesis 1 and 2 observe a delicate balance in stating but not overstating the unique importance of our kind. We are crucial to the plot but we are not the whole story. So, for example, though humans are created last, we share the sixth day with every other animal that lives on dry land. The division of days makes more distinction between birds and insects than between insects and us. Again, though the writer visualizes God breathing into the nostrils only of the man (and not even the woman), on several occasions all animals are characterized as having 'the breath of life' (Gen. 1.30, 6.17, 7.22). God blesses humankind, but blesses too 'every living and moving thing with which the water teems' – including not only 'the great creatures' but also, presumably, the small fry they feed on (Gen. 1.20 ff.).[6] In common with 'all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air', the first man is made by hand, out of the soil (though only he is made *out of the dust* of the soil, Gen. 2.7 – a distinction which does not obviously mark him out as superior!). The Hebrew word for soil here is *adamah*, which is echoed by the word for man, *adam*; and the fact that the man was made from soil is underlined in God's curse in Genesis 3.17, 19, and 23. Subsequently, though the first woman is given a name, Eve, which looks forward to her role as 'the mother of all the living', the first man is only ever known by the name which recalls his common origin with the other animals.[7]

Again, we are very familiar with the ways in which Genesis 1 gives peculiar prominence to the creation of humankind, but we tend to ignore the remarkable hiatus which follows it. At the end of the first, third, fourth, and fifth days, God pronounced the handiwork 'good', and likewise after making everything except humankind on the sixth day. Then, contrary to our expectation, God did not express any satisfaction with us as such but instead 'saw *all that he had made* that it was really very good' (Gen. 1.31).[8]

God is like a chef who kisses his fingers in delight as he unveils each successive course, and then, as he lifts the lid off his *pièce de résistance*, says: 'You know, the whole meal is superb.' We may infer that it is the last item that inspires this remark, that its supreme quality confirms, and even improves, the quality of the whole; but the whole is what matters, and it is only in its context and by implication that we know how good the final part is. Changing the metaphor, humankind may be the jewel in the crown, but it is the crown which is praised, not the jewel which enhances it. We may say that God loves creation, and especially human beings;[9] but we cannot impose on scripture the weaker formulation, 'God loves us. Of course, he also values the rest of his works.'

The currency among many evangelicals of the Hellenistic belief that other species exist for us (and are vastly inferior to us) is remarkable given all that scripture says to the contrary. Consider the book of Job: in chapters 38 to 41, God speaks with a glorious pride in creation and overwhelms Job with a vision of mysteries and intimacies unknown to him. We cannot be surprised when naturalists tell us that the most wonderful creatures on earth live far removed from human eyes.[10] The Creator's praise of Behemoth ('first among the works of God') and Leviathan ('nothing on earth is his equal') rolls out like thunder. Job takes the point: 'I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know . . . Therefore I despise myself' (Job 42.3b, 6a). He is not affirmed, but humbled. Yet we, too often, do not take the point. We presume to explain away such passages as poetic hyperbole and are quick to distinguish human beings from 'mere animals'. Our frequent response to the reductionism of scientists such as Richard Dawkins, who argues that all living things are no more than 'survival machines' for their genes, is not to reassert the glory of animals in the eyes of God but to distance ourselves from them. In fact, the more science degrades animals – both in theory and in such practices as cloning and genetic engineering – the more some Christians try to deny our common nature. Ironically, the same response is often made to the 'anti-reductionism' of modern Pagans and others who seek to re-establish the ancient – and biblical[11] – idea that the physical world is not merely material. Their pleas that we should recognize the integrity and worth of all living creatures seem to be almost wilfully misheard as a call to worship them. On all sides we seem to be trying to defend our status as humans at the expense of other creatures.

It is often said that when the first man named all the birds and beasts (Gen. 2.18 ff.) he became the first scientist. If anything, he was the first poet. The act of naming the animals recognizes precisely what 'value-free'

science does not: their inner meaning and intrinsic worth. There is a depth of significance in this which defies the word 'only' that so often we apply to animals. 'And whatever *adam* called each living creature, that was its name.' Even as we are reminded again that the man is made of soil, the writer seems to imply that, uniquely, he has the authority in some sense to define absolutely what his fellow creatures amount to. God has brought them to him to see, almost literally, what he will make of them. In some sense, *adam*'s subjective opinion becomes objective fact. If this is indeed a meaning of the text, it places a remarkable weight on our response to other species. When God sees the children of *adam* describing the great blue whales as 'floating meatballs' and hunting them to effectual extinction, it is hard not to believe that it is a cause of intense disappointment to their Creator, even grief.[12]

This capacity of ours to judge – to discern, to appraise, and to decide – I attribute to the 'image of God' in which we are made. This is perhaps the most resonant phrase in the account of creation, and to some extent it has prompted and validated some of the misreadings of the text. Five times in Genesis (1.26f., 5.1, 9.6) human beings are explicitly and uniquely said to resemble God. Clearly, this confers upon us an extraordinary distinction. But what exactly does it mean? Barth complains that 'expositors have . . . pursued all kinds of arbitrarily invested interpretations'.[13] At some time or another, almost everything we have thought (or would like to think) peculiar to our kind has been identified as part of the divine image, as proof that we are 'not just animals'. At the same time, the assumption that no other creature carries that image has encouraged us to suppose that everything that is characteristic of God must be foreign to other species. If any property can be said to be Godlike, the logic runs, we may possess it but no one else can.

These two lines of thought have combined to produce a very long list to our credit, which has been extended by other prejudices from less Christian sources. For example, we often seem more disposed to believe Descartes' pronouncement that the reason why animals do not speak as we do is not that they lack the organs but that they have no thoughts[14] than to accept the contrary assumption of Numbers 22.28ff.[15] The idea that human beings are essentially other than and superior to other species has so pervaded our culture that such fancies often persist in the face of both reason and evidence. Some would be impossible to prove. How do we know, for example, that no other species is rational?[16] How could we know, until we had deciphered not only their vocalizations but their mental processes, that no other species uses language?[17] How could we substantiate the common

claim that only we have a sense of humour? Montaigne's unanswerable point – 'by the same reason they may think us to be beasts as we think them'[18] – could be applied to another question that goes closer to the bone: How could we establish that no other species has a moral sense? What evidence do whales have that *we* know the difference between right and wrong?[19]

Some fond illusions, perhaps, have gone. For example, the boast that only humans use tools has had to be revised, again and again. Careful and sympathetic observation of the 'higher' mammals suggests that they are much closer to us than we care to admit. So, for example, the zoologist Cynthia Moss writes: 'Elephants are . . . intelligent, complicated, intense, tender, powerful, and funny . . . watching [them] is like reading an engrossing, convoluted novel . . .'[20] Jacques Cousteau speaks of whales as 'sociable, affectionate, devoted, gentle, captivating, high-spirited creatures'.[21] Sue Savage-Rumbaugh reports:

> It is possible, if one looks beyond the slightly differently shaped face, to read the emotions of apes as easily and as accurately as one reads the emotions and feelings of other human beings. There are few feelings that apes do not share with us, except perhaps self-hatred. They certainly experience and express exuberance, joy, guilt, remorse, disdain, disbelief, awe, sadness, wonder, tenderness, loyalty, anger, distrust and love . . . Only those who live and interact with apes as closely as they do with members of their own species will be able to understand the immense depth of the behavioral similarities between ape and man.[22]

Jane Goodall, who has spent a lifetime studying chimpanzees in the wild, crosses a further boundary: 'Like us . . . they . . . are capable of true altruism.'[23]

Here we come close to the heart of human supremacism, the belief that we alone are 'spiritual beings'. But what are we saying here? If we accept that other species can relate to humans (and given that Genesis 1 and 2 imply that our interaction with them is part of the original design of creation it would be perverse if this appearance of relationship was no more than an illusion), how can we deny that they can, and must, enjoy a relationship with their Creator? We read in scripture that they look to God, and that God makes covenants with them.[24] If a dog can return her 'owner's' affection, why should she not also love God who made her? One theologian recently declared: 'No group of chimpanzees will ever sit around the table arguing about the doctrine of the Trinity or the relative merits of

Calvinism or Arminianism!'[25] Thank God for that! But is it impossible to detect in the placid demeanour of a gorilla a humble, thankful heart? C. S. Lewis once speculated about life on other planets: 'There might be creatures genuinely spiritual, whose powers of manufacture and abstract thought were so humble that we should mistake them for mere animals.'[26] And what if earth's 'mere animals' were just such?

Perhaps the English language misleads us here: the very word 'animal' is almost the opposite to 'spiritual' – which is why many Christians strongly reject the idea that human beings are animals, because they assume that this means we do not have spirits, or souls. But of course the soul – the distinct 'immortal' part which inhabits our bodies much as our bodies inhabit our clothes – is a Greek concept which is quite foreign to the Bible.[27] In Hebrew, the words for 'animal', 'breath', and 'spirit' are often related (as, indeed, in Latin: our word 'animal' is derived from a family of words, of which *anima* means 'breath' or 'spirit' and *animus* means 'mind'). The Hebrew word translated 'creature' in Genesis 1 and 2 is *nephesh*, whose root means 'breathe' – and which is frequently (and tendentiously) translated 'soul' in human contexts throughout the Old Testament. The 'breath' of life is *ruach*, which elsewhere is rendered 'spirit' (or even 'Spirit'). Likewise, the standard Greek word for 'animal' is *zoon*, which is related to *zoe*, 'life' (as in Jesus' declaration in John 14.6, *eimi he zoe*: 'I am Life'). In other words, whereas English suggests a distinction between the animal kingdom and the world of the spirit, these ancient languages tend to imply a continuum.

But if the question 'Do other species have souls?' is not a biblical one, the question, 'Where do their spirits go when they die?' is (Eccles. 3.21). We are given no categorical answer – and why should we be? Perhaps the Bible addresses in detail only the issue of human status and salvation because only humans read it. When Peter asks Jesus what lies in store for John, he is told: 'What is that to you? You must follow me' (John 21.22). Nevertheless, there are indications that the world to come will be populated by more than the rational human souls of Hellenistic-Christian imagination. The *cherubim* of the Old Testament are portrayed as elemental wind-creatures, part human, part beast. In Revelation 4 and 5, the four 'animals' (the Greek word is *zoa*) who are closest to the throne of God have the appearance respectively of a lion, an ox, a man, and an eagle. Isaiah's vision sees the wolf, the leopard, the lion, the bear, and the cobra living in harmony with the lamb, the goat, the yearling, and the cow, 'and a little child will lead them' (11.6–9).[28] Finally, Paul hints that 'the glory that will be revealed to us' will somehow, through the agency of redeemed human

beings, involve the liberation of the whole creation to share in 'the glorious freedom of the children of God' (Rom. 8.18–25).

Yet if there is no compelling evidence that reason, or conscience, or a 'soul' sets us apart, does the phrase 'the image of God' serve no purpose except to make us feel, in a vague way, supremely important? To my mind, its meaning is provided by the great commission which immediately follows it in Genesis 1.26ff.: we were created to subdue the earth and to rule over all other species. The *imago Dei* consists in our 'dominion'. According to D. J. A. Clines, 'the image is to be understood not so much ontologically as existentially: it comes to expression not in the nature of man so much as in his activity and function.'[29] Ian Hart expresses this function as 'exercising dominion over the natural world'. 'In the last twenty years or so [this] has become the interpretation supported by the overwhelming majority of Old Testament scholars.'[30]

This understanding turns our supremacism upside-down, for if we resemble God in that we have dominion, we must be called to be 'imitators of God' (Eph. 5.1) in the way we exercise it. Indeed, far from giving us a free hand on the earth, the *imago Dei* constrains us. We must be kings, not tyrants – if we become the latter we deny, and even destroy, that image in us. How, then, does God exercise dominion? Psalm 145 tells us that God is gracious, compassionate, good, faithful, loving, generous, and protective, not to humankind only but to 'all he has made'. God's characteristic act is to bless, and it is God's constant care that ensures that the cattle, the lions, and even the birds are fed and watered (Ps. 104; Matt. 6.26).

Perhaps because the duty of 'dominion' has been twisted into a right of domination, many green Christians today are promoting instead the idea that we are stewards of the earth. Although there is no obvious scriptural warrant for it, it is easy to see why this is attractive. Stewards, after all, are entrusted with what does not belong to them, and are accountable for its well-being to a higher authority. Their obligation is to their master, to be faithful and prudent. The problem is that this model does not really challenge the prevailing ethos of our science, which is reductive, and of our technology, which is exploitative. It no more than qualifies the modern idea that the world and its non-human inhabitants are a resource for our use: yes, they are a resource but they belong to God; yes, we can use them, but we must use them with care. Nor does it challenge our supremacism: we think of a steward as other than and superior to the property he or she manages.[31] A king, on the other hand, does not manage things: he rules over living beings. He too must answer to God, but he also has obligations to his subjects. Furthermore, he is essentially of the same kind as them, though as

'the Lord's anointed' he has privileges as well as responsibilities.[32] The Bible has no time for the fiction of royal blood: the greatest kings of Israel were chosen from among the common people – created, one might almost say, from the dust.[33] God introduces Saul simply as 'a man from the land of Benjamin' (I Sam. 9.16). David, the exemplar of kingship, was only a shepherd boy, and the youngest of eight brothers. Nor does the true king try to exalt himself by debasing his subjects, as the tyrant Rehoboam did (II Chron. 10), but he rejoices in their nobility, for their greatness only makes him greater. Think of the catalogue of David's 'mighty men' (II Sam. 23.8–39). Their prowess does not detract from his – on the contrary, the higher they are praised, the higher he is exalted, because he is still their lord. Perhaps most importantly, the king is essentially a servant to his subjects. Ezekiel 34 sets out most movingly what God expects of those who have dominion, expressed in terms of a shepherd's unstinting care for his sheep. The most glorious king of Israel, Solomon, daunted by his duty to 'this great people', pleases God by asking 'for discernment in administering justice' rather than for long life or wealth or security (I Kings 3.5–14).[34] The wisdom God gives him is at once exercised on behalf of the least of those people, in his famous judgment of the dispute between two prostitutes over a baby.[35]

This idea of servant-kingship is fully realized in Jesus, the Good Shepherd, whom the New Testament identifies as the actual image of God.[36] He himself tells his disciples: 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them . . . but you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves . . . I am among you as one who serves' (Luke 22.25ff.). Our own understanding of kingship is more likely to be informed by ideas put about in Shakespeare's day, that a king is essentially different from his people, set above and apart from them not just by his status but by his very nature. So Richard II finds his own mere humanity a puzzle:

> I live with bread like you, feel want,
> Taste grief, need friends: subjected thus,
> How can you say to me I am a king?
> (*Richard II*, III.ii)

But this 'subjection' is precisely what the true king of kings embraced. He demonstrated his kingship over us not by asserting that he was different from us but by becoming like us: not by oppressing us or putting us down but by serving us and raising us up – and it was precisely because he

identified with his subjects that he was given the highest honour (Phil. 2.6–11). The Person by whom and for whom all creatures were made, by whose word of power they are sustained and in whom they hold together – and to whom they will all one day sing praises – established for all time the principle that lordship entails solidarity and sacrifice.[37]

If we have dominion over God's other creatures, then we are called to live in peace with them, as good shepherds and humble servants. We cannot say that we are made in the image of God and then use that as our pretext to abuse, neglect, or even belittle other species, when God does none of those things. As kings, we have the power of life and death over them, and the right to exercise it in accordance with the principles of justice and mercy; but we have the parallel duty, not only to God but to them, to love them and protect them – looking forward to the day when they and we shall live in harmony in 'the glorious freedom of the children of God'. The patterns the Bible offers us include the first man, who gave names to all the beasts and birds, and whose own name recalls his common origin with them; the exemplar of kingship, David, who took the relationship that a man has with the animals in his care as a model for God's love and provision for us; and Jesus himself, who taught that the good shepherd not only knows his sheep by name but ultimately is willing to lay down his life for them. There is no basis here for arrogant human supremacism.